

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of January 17, 2019

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair Kenneth W. Goslant, Board members Lynn Doney, Julie H. Goodrich, K. David Maxwell, and Nathaniel Miller. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Finance Director Laurie Baroffio, John Helfant (Police Chief), and Elroy Hill.

Chair Goslant called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

- II. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Scheduled):** None.

III. BUDGET WORK SESSION

- a. Northfield Police Department (NPD).** Manager Schulz noted there still remain a couple of unresolved issues in this budget: the correct amount to budget for overtime expenses and the possible purchase of Tasers and new body cameras to accompany them. He noted the NPD overtime line item for FY 2019/2020 is now set at \$20,000 even though the actual overtime cost in the last completed fiscal year (2017/2018) was \$50,631. Police Chief John Helfant said there were provisions in the current NPD union contract that (in his opinion) resulted in inflated overtime costs. One was the requirement that when a full-time NPD officer is on sick leave or vacation, the other full-time NPD officers are asked first whether they would like to earn overtime by filling the absent officer's shifts. If Chief Helfant had the option of offering this overtime to part-time NPD officers, he believes the overtime expense could be cut by two-thirds. Unless this requirement is removed in the next NPD union contract, Chief Helfant felt the Select Board members should get used to higher than expected NPD overtime expenses. It was noted the current NPD union contract will expire June 30, 2019, and a new contract now is under negotiation. Manager Schulz said this issue is among the items under discussion.

Board member Maxwell felt now there are six (6) full-time NPD officers (not including Chief Helfant) there should be some reduction in overtime expenses. Chief Helfant added even though he felt it is a gray area in the NPD union contract, it has been established practice in the department that the most senior NPD full-time officers are given first choice whether to fill understaffed shifts even though they are already the highest paid officers. Chief Helfant would like these requests rotated amongst the less senior full-time officers and perhaps the part-time officers. Finance Director Laurie Baroffio said on the basis on what was spent on NPD for the first half of the current fiscal year, there is a projected overtime expense of \$47,000 for FY 2018/2019. It was noted this result may be skewed since this period includes events requiring significant NPD overtime coverage (i.e., Labor Day Weekend festivities, Norwich University Homecoming, etc.). Manager Schulz feels the \$20,000 currently budgeted is too low but he did not advise going much higher than \$35,000. Board member Maxwell felt it would be worthwhile to plan for the worst case scenario and thus budget \$40,000. After further discussion, Board member Maxwell's suggestion was accepted. This matter will be revisited during next year's budget sessions. At that time it should be evident whether the new NPD union contract has had a positive effect or not on overtime expenses. Chair Goslant wonders whether the Northfield community really requires 24/7 police coverage. Manager Schulz said this is mandated in the current NPD union contract. Board member Maxwell felt this was a discussion for another time. Ms. Baroffio noted the NPD part-time budget for FY 2019/2020 now is set at \$9,000. She asked if this was appropriate given the current number of full-time NPD officers. After some discussion, this amount was reduced to \$4,000.

Manager Schulz said another outstanding item is Taser purchase. Chief Helfant spoke recently to a Taser distributor and was informed the current price for the Tasers alone is \$1,920 each. If seven (7) Tasers were purchased together to equip all the full-time NPD officers and himself, the total cost would be \$13,440. Chief Helfant said another option was a package deal ("Taser 60") that would provide seven (7) Tasers along with holsters, training cartridges, live cartridges, and free batteries for five (5) years for a total cost of \$16,030. This also includes a no-interest payment plan split over five (5) years so there would be a \$3,206 annual payment. Chief Helfant noted since the Taser batteries cost \$73 each and have to be replaced annually, this really is a bargain.

Board member Miller asked if this package deal would be available if the municipality decided to purchase fewer Tasers. Chief Helfant said it would. As for body cameras, the new model (Axon 2) is designed to start recording automatically once the officer's Taser is activated. The recording also will show the thirty (30) seconds beforehand. The NPD currently has Axon 1 body cameras that provide good quality recordings but require the officer to manually switch them on. In addition, the Axon 1 is no longer supported by the manufacturer so they will need to be eventually replaced. The Axon 2 body cameras cost about \$900 each, which would make a total expenditure of \$6,300 for seven (7). For recording purposes, these body cameras (and corresponding Tasers) are linked to an individual police officer so they cannot be shared. Board member Goodrich asked if there were state or federal grants available for Taser and body camera purchases. Chief Helfant said there had been but not at the present time.

Board member Maxwell asked if there was about \$6,000 in the NPD budget that could be cut to cover the expense of purchasing seven (7) Tasers and seven (7) Axon 2 body cameras in FY 2019/2020. Board member Miller said one option was to purchase fewer the first year. Chief Helfant said if the current body camera were retained, it would be possible for the full-time officers to share the Tasers. Board member Maxwell asked if this purchase could be delayed for another year. That seemed to be the Select Board opinion at a previous budget meeting. Chief Helfant said he would like to have the Tasers in the coming year but his department would survive without them. This also would allow the municipality to start setting aside funds for their future purchase. Chair Goslant has been ambivalent regarding whether the NPD should have Tasers but after speaking to additional people and gathering more information, he now feels they should. Board member Doney noted there is a \$9,780 balance in the NPD Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for building improvements. Since some needed repairs to the Police Station already have been completed and no major expenditures are anticipated in the near future, he suggested some of these funds could be used for Taser purchase. He also feels NPD officers should be equipped with Tasers. Board member Maxwell believes the gist of proper municipal budgeting is setting priorities. He thinks equipping our police officers with Tasers should be at the top of the list since they could be vital for their personal safety in certain circumstances. Ms. Baroffio noted the NPD Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget now has a \$3,179 balance for future computer purchases. Perhaps some of these funds could be used. Board member Maxwell favors buying seven (7) Tasers in the next fiscal year but phasing in the purchase of new body cameras over the next few years. In that case, Ms. Baroffio suggested it might be a good idea to split the Taser and body camera budgets into separate line items.

Board member Miller remains skeptical on equipping police officers with Tasers. If the Select Board decides to authorize their purchase, he would like only a couple purchased for a trial period to see if they prove worthwhile. Board member Goodrich believes it should be all or nothing. Either all the full-time officers will be equipped with Tasers or none of them. Board member Doney agrees with Board member Maxwell's proposal to equip all the full-time officers but postpone new body camera purchases until sufficient funds have been set aside over the next few years. Chief Helfant noted having the Tasers on hand doesn't just protect the police officer but there also are situations when they protect members of the general public as well. For example, suicidal persons have been tased to prevent them from shooting themselves or jumping from bridges, buildings, etc. He has seen several body camera videos documenting this.

After further discussion, the Select Board consensus was to purchase seven (7) Tasers through the aforementioned Taser 60 package deal and five (5) year installment plan. \$3,206 will be put into the FY 2019/2020 NPD CEP budget to fund this purchase. A separate line item will be created for buying new body cameras and funds for this expense will be budgeted over the next few years. In addition, \$3,500 will be added to the NPD operations budget to cover the annual Taser maintenance contract. Chief Helfant will be sending one of his officers to a Taser training course in February to become a certified Taser instructor. Therefore, all the full-time NPD officers can be trained in-house after the Tasers are purchased during the next fiscal year. Chair Goslant and the other Select Board members then thanked Chief Helfant for the valuable information provided tonight and for the good work he has done since he took command of the NPD about three (3) months ago.

- b. FY 2019/2020 Town Budget Recap.** Manager Schulz said he believes the Select Board members now have covered all the outstanding issues in the proposed FY 2019/2020 budget. Ms. Baroffio had distributed a handout of changes the Select Board have approved to date regarding the first draft budget that was distributed about two (2) months ago. She will revise this tomorrow morning to reflect the actions taken by the Select Board members tonight. She estimated the current budget proposal would result in about a 10.2 cent increase in the 2018/2019 Town Tax Rate. She will have an exact figure when all budget revisions have been incorporated into the finalized version. The Select Board members will have a final budget meeting next Monday night (01/21/19), at which time they will confirm all revisions. The finalized budget will be formally adopted at the next night's regular meeting.

Some discussion then followed regarding how the recent voluntary merger of the Northfield and Williamstown school districts would affect the school portion of the tax rate. Manager Schulz said more information on this should be available next week. After a general discussion of compelled school mergers, some felt it was unfair some fiscally-responsible school districts were being forced to take on schools with long histories of financial mismanagement.

Elroy Hill has attended almost all the budget meetings and he has seen the Select Board members (reluctantly) increase some department budgets in order to address some long-standing problems. He felt this was in contrast to previous years when the focus seemed to be on cutting budgets regardless of the long-term consequences. Chair Goslant believes this budget will deliver the most value for the tax dollar. Board member Maxwell feels public safety has been an emphasis throughout this budget process when setting spending priorities. Quite a few items on department heads' "wish lists" were deferred to a later time since they were not considered essential.

Board member Miller would like a list of some of the items that will be revisited next Monday night when the proposed budget is given one last run-through. After some discussion, the following items were indicated: the tanker truck (Fire Department); the gravel/stone, paving, and bridge budgets (Highway Department); the PowerLoad system and defibrillators (Ambulance Department); and the new ballfield dugouts (Grounds/Parks/Facilities). Manager Schulz said considerable taxpayer money will be saved by the Select Board members' decision to transfer CIP and CEP funds from dormant accounts. Board member Goodrich said the use of anticipated current fiscal year surpluses will help. Chair Goslant said the Select Board members may have over-budgeted on some items last year to play it safe but now using these surplus funds wisely is a certain benefit to the taxpayer. Board member Maxwell thanked Manager Schulz and Ms. Baroffio for all their hard work in putting this budget together.

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Unscheduled). There was none.

V. EXECUTIVE SESSION: Motion by Board member Maxwell, seconded by Board member Doney, to go into executive session, in accordance with 1 VSA 313 (a)(1), in order to discuss a personnel matter with Manager Schulz present. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board went into executive session at 7:45 p.m.

Motion by Board member Maxwell, seconded by Board member Goodrich, to come out of executive session. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board came out of executive session at 8:15 p.m. No action was taken.

VI. ADJOURNMENT. Motion by Board member Goodrich, seconded by Board member Doney, to adjourn. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board adjourned at 8:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

An audio recording of this meeting is available in the Town Manager's Office.

These minutes were approved at the regular Select Board meeting of February 12, 2019.